The Man Who Married Lincoln's Parents

An Address By

REV. WILLIAM E. BARTON, D. D., LL. D.

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Delivered at the Dedication of a Monument at the Grave of Rev. Jesse Head and Jane Ramsey Head, his Wife, in Spring Hill Cemetery, Harrodsburg, Kentucky, Thursday, November 2, 1922.

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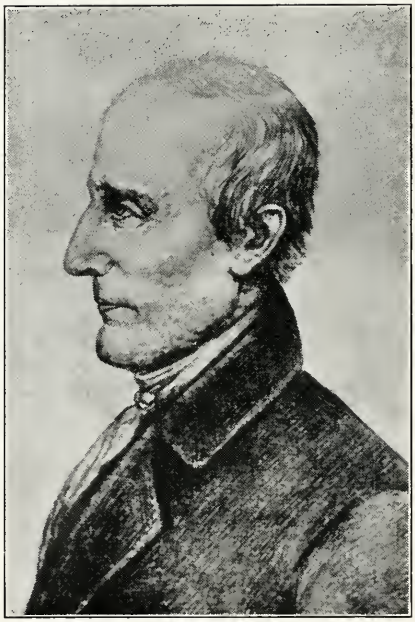

REV. JESSE HEAD

The Man Who Married Lincoln's Parents

An Address in Memory of

REV. JESSE HEAD

by

WILLIAM E. BARTON

We are assembled in a place appointed for the burial of the dead, but we have not come to mourn. The man around whose grave we stand came to the end of his earthly life in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in its season. He had lived his three score years and ten and had continued four years longer upon borrowed time. His faithful wife, who sleeps by his side, lived until she was more than four score years of age. There was no occasion for bitter grief at the time of their death; they had lived their honest, virtuous and completed lives. Death had for them no terror, and the grief of those who remained behind was grief without a sting. Even if there had been sorrow at the time, and there appears to have been no occasion for it, there would be no reason for it now. It is more than eighty years since Jesse Head died. Mark Anthony at Caesar's funeral is supposed by Shakespeare to have said that he came to bury Caesar, not to praise him. Quite other is the case with us. We came not to bury Jesse Head, but to pay him a tribute of honor. We are assembled to unveil above the hitherto unmarked grave of Jesse Head and his wife a simple but dignified and durable monument that shall perpetuate the memory of the last resting place of these two simple but sincere and earnest servants of God.

It is not the memory of a funeral that calls us together; it is rather a reminder of a wedding. That wedding was one of the many in which Jesse Head had a share. The court records of this county of Mercer, as well as those in Washington county, bear witness to the frequency with which he was called upon to solemnize marriages. The one we have in mind was at the time in no important respect different from the others. It was a backwoods wedding and it was celebrated after the usual boistrous fashion of such festivities, on the Beech Fork, in Washington county. The house in which the marriage occurred then stood in the name of Richard Berry.

Through the enterprise and public spirit of Hon. W. W. Stephenson, Mr. N. L. Curry and others, the logs of that building were saved from oblivion, and stand re-erected in the historic cabin, hard by the site of the old Fort of Harrodsburg. It is that wedding which associates the name of Jesse Head with that of the Lincoln family, and insures the perpetual remembrance of the name of Jesse Head. That marriage occurred on Thursday, June 12, 1806. Thomas Lincoln, aged 28, was joined in marriage to Nancy Hanks, aged 23.

For more than seventy years the record of this marriage was unknown. Abraham Lincoln himself was not aware that the record existed. His mother died in 1818, and his father in 1851. Up to that time he had had no occasion to inquire particularly concerning the records of his family. Not until after his debate with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 did he emerge into national politics, and find himself in request for information concerning his ancestors. The natural place to look for such record was in Hardin county, for Thomas Lincoln had owned land there as early as 1803, and that county was the home of the Hanks family. But in 1805 Lincoln had returned to Washington county where his widowed mother had resided since the death of her husband in 1786, and where the two elder brothers of Thomas, Mordecai and Josiah, continued to live. There also Nancy Hanks, an orphan, was in residence, the Berry family apparently being relatives. Neither Abraham Lincoln nor anyone else during his life time discovered the record, for no one thought of looking for it in Washington county. There was a tradition in Washington county, however, that the marriage had occurred within its bounds. Mrs. C. S. H. Vawter does not appear to have been wholly accurate in all her records and opinions, but this she certainly did in that she published in the Louisville Courier of April 14, 1874, her statement that, having gone to Washington county as a school teacher in 1859, she there heard at the time of Abraham Lincoln's nomination for the Presidency the statement of an old man that the parents of Abraham Lincoln had been married in that county in the home of Francis Berry. How much this publication had to do with the discovery of the record, may perhaps be matter of dispute; but the fact is that four years later, in 1878, Mr. William F. Booker, County Clerk of Washington county, discovered the marriage bond, signed by Thomas Lincoln and the second Richard Berry, dated June 10, 1806, and a marriage return certifying the wedding of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks on June 12, 1806, by Jesse Head, a deacon in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

But who was this Jesse Head? Conference records and other official sources were searched in vain. Rev. E. B. Head, a grandson, gave rather meager information. So little was learned about Jesse Head in 1878, or in the forty years that followed, that there were those who freely charged that no such minister existed, and that the record was a forgery, created for

the purpose of disproving the charge that Abraham Lincoln was an illegitimate child. When I first set about the gathering of material for a book, published in 1920, bearing the title, "The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln," the information which I found available was so meager that I was compelled to institute an investigation upon my own account. The first documents, excepting the marriage record itself, which had any important bearing upon this question, were some which I was able to locate in a personal investigation in Washington county. In this matter I was assisted by the County Attorney, Hon. Joseph Polin, and subsequently, and to a larger extent, by Hon. Lafe S. Pence, of Lebanon, Kentucky. Through the efforts of these friends and such investigation as I was able myself to make, the career of Jesse Head in Washington county emerged and took form, and Mr. Pence has himself written the substance of it in a series of articles printed in Lebanon.

Far greater, however, is my obligation to Miss Mary A. Stephenson, whose prolonged and diligent search, in which she has been assisted by her sister, Miss Martha, has resulted in the recovery of virtually the whole history of Jesse Head, from 1810 to 1842; for in the former year, he removed from Washington county to Mercer and here in Harrodsburg he spent the last thirty-two years of his life. But for the labor of Miss Stephenson we should not be holding this celebration. Here Jesse Head's widow remained after his death until she also died. Their bodies at first were buried in the garden of his own home, but later were removed to this cemetery, where today we are erecting this memorial.

It had been my hope that Miss Stephenson would consent to give to us today an account of the life and work of Jesse Head, particularly that part which he spent in Harrodsburg. She has declined this suggestion and I will not attempt to do what I hope she will yet do over her own signature. Let me, however, briefly outline the life of the man, whose grave we today are marking.

Jesse Head, son of William Edward Head, was born June 10, 1768, in Frederick county, Maryland. On April 10, 1768, was born in Bradford county, Pennsylvania, Jane Ramsey, to whom he was married January 9, 1789. About 1795, he migrated from Maryland to Kentucky and made his home on Road Run, not far from the Lincolns and Berrys. His farm consisted of fifty-four acres. His name is not found in the Washington county tax lists of 1792 or 1795, but in the next list which has been discovered, that of 1797, his name appears. It recurs in the lists of 1800, 1801, 1803, 1804, 1805. Many of the lists have perished. It is probable that if all had been preserved we should find him continuously living in Washington county from 1796 to 1810. He had a farm and owned horses, never less than one and sometimes as

many as three, but he owned four lots in the town of Springfield, and there he resided during the greater part of the period of his residence in Washington county. He was a cabinet maker and a justice of the peace. On April 3, 1802, he became a trustee of the town of Springfield, and on June 10, 1803, became president of the Board of Trustees. His office as justice of the peace began January 6, 1798. From that date until October 10, 1810, when he signed his last court order in Washington county, his signatures to official documents are numerous. His duties judicial and ecclesiastical did not prevent his performance of his work as a carpenter. To him was committed the erection of a whipping post, stocks and pillory in the Court House Square at Springfield.

Jesse Head was entitled to solemnize marriages as a justice of the peace, but his marriages were not performed in that capacity. His official returns were signed, Jesse Head, D. M. E. C., by which he meant Deacon in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Until now it has been impossible to give any clear statement of his ecclesiastical standing. In 1920 was published "The Journal of the Western Conference for the Years 1800-1811." In this volume it was recorded that at a meeting of the Conference, held at Anthony Houston's in Scott county, Kentucky, October 2, 1806, Bishop Asbury presiding, Jesse Head was in good standing as a deacon. This is so far as I know the only extant record of his standing as a minister. This is early enough to cover the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks; but this was not the beginning of his ministry. Mr. Pence found in Washington county a book of "Court Martials" from 1796 to 1812, in which was the record of the men charged with evading militia duty. On May 25, 1708, it was recorded that Jesse Head, who had been returned as delinquent, was "cleared off the muster roll, he having a license to preach according to the rules of the sect to which he belongs." The original ordination of Jesse Head as a deacon must have been at least seven years earlier than the Conference record cited. The records of that period, both civil and ecclesiastical, are meager and fragmentary; but these two are sufficient. They certify to us Jesse Head's ecclesiastical standing in the ministry of his own denomination, and the recognition of that standing by the civil and military authorities of the county in which he lived.

Living as he did in the county seat and seldom if ever being long absent on a circuit, Jesse Head was available for marriages. A very large proportion of the couples married in Washington county, prior to 1810, were married by him. He did not make his returns for each marriage separately, but sent in his record at intervals of several months, certifying a dozen or fifteen marriages on the same sheet. His handwriting was legible. Invariably he signed his name with a long S in his name Jesse. I suppose it to have been his availability as well as his being a neighbor and a friend of the

Lincolns and the Berrys which caused him to be called to solemnize the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks; for the Lincoln family and the Hankses were Baptists.

In 1810, as already stated, he removed to Harrodsburg, where he bought a lot on the site of the present Hotel Harrod, nearly opposite the Court House. There he established his shop, the making of coffins being no small part of his trade.

He must have been acquainted in Harrodsburg at a considerably earlier period. On November 25, 1845, more than thirty years before the name of Jesse Head was given publicity in connection with the marriage of the Lincolns, General Robert B. McAfee, in a letter to Dr. Lyman C. Draper, said:

"The Harrodsburg Springs were first discovered by the Rev. Jesse Head, a Methodist clergyman, in 1806."

If General McAfee was correct in this, then Harrodsburg owes one of its chief distinctions to Mr. Head, and he made the discovery in the very year in which he married the parents of Abraham Lincoln. It is quite possible that it was his faith in these springs which caused him to remove his residence from Springfield to Harrodsburg.

In November, 1811, Jesse Head was elected a trustee of the town, and in 1813 he became chairman of the board. Very many of the town records are in his clear and legible handwriting. In 1815, he resigned as trustee on account of his removal from town; but in 1819 he was back again in Harrodsburg, for again he was elected a trustee and served as chairman of the Board in March of that year. He was a member of the Board almost continuously until 1827, often acting as chairman.

In those years he married many couples. Dr. Christopher Columbus Graham, the proprietor of the Harrodsburg Springs, being among those whose marriages he solemnized.

I have not discovered that Jesse Head was ever ordained an elder in the Methodist church. The eldership was understood to involve the riding of a circuit; and Jesse Head, in the language of the Methodist ministry in that day, was "located." We have numerous, and as I judge, reliable traditions, about his preaching in and about Harrodsburg and other towns; and he appears to have been active in connection with the early history of Methodism in Lexington. I do not find, however, that he was ever pastor of a church in that city, and he certainly was not pastor of the Methodist church in Harrodsburg, for that was founded in 1827, and the list of its ministers is complete and does not include the name of Jesse Head. He preached as many other pioneer ministers preached, working with his hands and riding on horsback to his various appointments. His was a service of which there was no record, save that which is kept in the books of the Recording Angel.

But who can estimate the heroism, the sacrifice and the value of services such as he performed in the pioneer days of this county and commonwealth?

In 1830, Jesse Head, in association with his son, Bascom Head, a printer, began the publication in Harrodsburg of a newspaper, called "The American." It was a Democratic organ, and was opposed by another local paper called "The Union." Some warm controversies grew out of this situation, and it is to one of these we owe a bit of doggerel that gives us a description of the personal appearance of Jesse Head:

"There is a man in our town,
Who walks the streets in a dressing-gown;
His nose is long and his hair is red,
And he goes by the name of Jesse Head."

Jesse Head was a man who made warm friends, and some pronounced enemies. One of these attempted either to kill or terrify Jesse Head. He waited for the minister as he was on his way to the Court House, and after Head had passed, he fired. Jesse Head turned back and faced him. "If you meant to kill me, you are a coward," he said, "and if you thought to frighten me, you are a fool."

For his day, Jesse Head was a well read man. His library was listed for sale ten years before his death, and it showed quite a remarkable range. There were seven volumes of church history, and seven of Wesley's sermons, and two sets of Clarke's commentaries, and a goodly assortment of other books, those on Methodism being prominent.

The listing of these books reminds us of Jesse Head's financial affairs. That he did not accumulate money as a result of his ministerial labors, need not be affirmed. He did not prosper in his secular business. More than once he was close to the edge of insolvency. His son bought his house and his personal property, and held them in trust, so that the old preacher and his widow had a roof over their heads as long as they lived. Otherwise he might have been homeless.

Jesse Head attained the age of three score and ten, and lived four additional years. He died March 22, 1842, and was buried with Masonic honors His wife lived until August 30, 1851. The closing years of their lives appear to have been uneventful. Their home was guaranteed to them by the faithfulness of their son, and they found means of supplying their simple wants. So they lived and finished their earthly pilgrimage, and had no dream that we should gather here today to pay honor to their memory.

Abraham Lincoln had not risen to fame when Jesse Head died. Jesse Head never heard of him. The minister had no occasion at any time during his life to think of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks as more likely to at-

tain distinction than any of the other numerous couples whom from time to time he married. If Jesse Head had been told that eighty years after his death a company like this would gather about his grave and pay tribute to his memory, it would have puzzled him to give a probable reason for such an improbable event, and if he had spent a year guessing he would never have been able to conjecture the real occasion of our coming.

Let not the casual association of his name with the Lincoln family blind us to the real glory of this man, Jesse Head, a glory which he shared with hundreds of other pioneer preachers whose very names are forgotten. Yet these were the men who came into a wilderness at a time when the thoughts of men were on the purchase of land and the fighting of Indians, and too often on the racing of horses and the drinking of whisky, and when it seemed that religion might be crowded wholly out of their lives and the life of the new civilization which they planted. These men, of whom Jesse Head was one, preserved the religious integrity of our civilization in one of its periods of crisis.

Edward Everett Hale had a little poem in which he honored the nameless men who toiled for us before we were born—the men who crossed the ocean and made homes in the wilderness. If we think of the men who crossed the mountains his lines would apply:

> "What was his name? I do not know his name;
> I only know he heard God's voice and came,
> Brought all he loved across the sea,
> And came to work for God and me.
> No pealing trumpet sounded forth his fame,
> He lived, he died; I do not know his name."

Not all of these pioneer preachers were educated men. Very few of them had so many books as Jesse Head. Some of them might even be called ignorant. But I like to remember a wise remark of Governor Ford in his History of Illinois, in which he says that while the pioneer preachers were undoubtedly ignorant, no one of them had difficulty in finding congregations still more ignorant. These men were adapted to their civilization. They preached a militant gospel, dogmatic, vigorous, and full of the terrors of hell. Their preaching in time brought a great revival, in which the future of Kentucky took on new life and hope. The wilderness had a baptism of fire. These backwoods preachers were the saviours of our Christian civilization in the new regions west of the mountains. In honoring one of them, this day, let us honor all of them, and with them their devoted and self-sacrificing wives. Nobly did they serve their generation, and worthily did they lay the foundations for much that is best in this generation, which for the

most part has forgotten their graves and in many instances their very names. They were hard-handed men, accustomed to corn-plowing and horse-trading, and they lacked many elements which might appear desirable in a ministry; but they were in earnest, and they were part and parcel of the civilization which they helped to shape, and their influence was permanent and good. Their's was a work which brought with it little recognition and no financial reward; nor is it possible at this late day to recover their names. This grave, like the grave of the unknown private at Arlington, may well represent to us the unmarked graves of all the men who rode through the woods in those early days, preaching and warning and inviting men to turn to God.

Turn now from the preacher who performed the marriage to the couple whom he married. Thomas Lincoln, aged 28, and Nancy Hanks, aged 23, belonged, both of them, to what President Abraham Lincoln called "undistinguished families." The Lincolns had more distinction than the Hankses. But there was nothing that gave promise that Thomas Lincoln in his rough jeans suit and Nancy Hanks in her linsey-woolsey, would ever become distinguished. Nor did they attain distinction. Yet they gave to America and the world one of the very greatest of our Presidents.

We have many reasons for honoring Abraham Lincoln. One of them comes freshly to us this day as we stand by the grave of this homespun hero, Jesse Head. Abraham Lincoln is part and parcel of America's own pioneer life. He typifies and exemplifies America; his life is a kind of epitome of our history, beginning as it does in the back woods, and reaching the crest of our civilization. When we honor Lincoln we honor primitive Kentucky, and primitive America.

Well may Kentucky rejoice in every honor paid to this, her illustrious son. Illinois is proud of his manhood, and Indiana of his boyhood; but Kentucky gave him birth. Abraham Lincoln belongs to no one State and to no one section. But Kentucky may well cherish in him her own honorable pride. She was his mother, and gave him to the world.

The Program

Procession of the Fraternal Orders, Women's Clubs and School Children of Harrodsburg, starting from the Lincoln Cabin on Old Fort Hill and proceeding to the grave in Spring Hill Cemetery.

K. B. Phillips and J. T. Ingram, Sr., Marshals

Judge Ben Casey Allin, presiding.

Invocation.....Rev. Jefferson Davis Redd

Vocal Duet—"Whispering Hope"
Miss Sue Johnson, Miss Ollie Morgan

Original Poem.....Henry Cleveland Wood

Address.....Rev. William E. Barton, D. D., of Chicago

Unveiling of Monument

By Mary Elizabeth Hutton and Jane Bird Hutton, great-great-great-granddaughters of Rev. Jesse Head.

Vocal Quartette—"Lead Kindly Light"
Miss Sue Johnson, Mrs. J. Hal Grimes, Frank Douglas Curry, Burnett Alderson.

Masonic Prayer and Benediction.....Rev. S. S. Daughtry

Mrs. J. Hal Grimes, Musical Director

THE POEM

By Mr. Henry Cleveland Wood

REV. JESSE HEAD

Deacon Methodist Episcopal Church

Read by the author at the dedication of the Head Monument in Spring Hill Cemetery, November 2, 1922.

He was a man, God-fearing and austere,
Bold in denunciation of all wrong,
And fearless when he battled for the right.
He worked in wood on week days at his bench,
But on the Sabbath rode and preached The Word,
Seeking to bring all sinners unto Christ.

Within the counties where he worked and lived,
He entered largely in the people's lives,
Was one of them, shared joys and sorrows, too.
Young couples wed—the groom in suit of jeans,
His blushing bride in home-made cap and gown;
Perchance the couple rode the selfsame nag.

He little dreamed—this earnest man of God,
When he united in the holy bonds
Of matrimony these two simple lives,
Tom Lincoln and his sweetheart, Nancy Hanks,
In that rude cabin built of native logs
On Beech Fork waters in the long ago—

That from this lowly union there would spring
A modern Moses to a captive race;
A just man, fashioned in heroic mould—
Of Hero's stuff—a fearless President—
Emancipator—yet a Martyr, too—
Abraham Lincoln—Man of Destiny.

—Henry Cleveland Wood.

Harrodsburg, Ky., Nov. 2, 1922.

The Dedication

(From the Harrodsburg Herald, Nov. 2, 1922)

Yesterday afternoon under clear autumn skies and in the presence of a large assemblage of people, the chaste and beautiful monument was unveiled to Rev. Jesse Head, pioneer Methodist Circuit Rider, who on June 12, 1806, married Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, the parents of Abraham Lincoln. The long procession formed before the little log cabin on Old Fort Hill, in which the marriage ceremony was said in those long ago days, and ended at Spring Hill Cemetery where the minister who performed the rite has been sleeping in an unmarked grave. Fraternal orders, school children, Historical Society and other organizations joined in the line of march, and many citizens and strangers in town gathered with them around the lowly mounds where sleep Jesse Head and his wife, Jane Ramsey Head.

The program is given herewith in this paper and suffice to say here that was splendidly carried out, and each number was most effectively given. Dr. Barton's address was excellent and was listened to with deep interest by all, many hearing for the first time facts about the rugged and many-sided old pioneer preacher that were new to them. Among the most interesting was that he was the first to discover the medicinal merit of Graham Springs and it was this healthful water that is supposed to have drawn him to Harrodsburg to live in 1810. In the Draper historical collection is a letter from Gen. Robert McAfee in which he speaks of the wonderful medicinal springs that were discovered by Jesse Head. The entire address of Dr. Barton will be given in the Herald next week as time is too short to publish it in this issue. In it he paid grateful tribute to Miss Mary Stephenson for her valuable aid in uncovering much of the forgotten records of Jesse Head's life in this community.

Following his address the cloth that veiled the monument was lifted by little Misses Mary Elizabeth and Jane Bird Hutton, the great-great-great-granddaughters of Jesse Head. They are children of Editor and Mrs. D. M.

Hutton and are descendants of the pioneer preacher on the maternal side. As they removed the crossed flags before the monument and lifted the white covering they made at attractive picture, linking the old generation that settled the new Kentucky with the new generation that is now enjoying the privileges and luxuries of the old Kentucky, that the struggles and hardships of the pioneers made possible.

The monument itself is ideally fashioned for its purpose. It is of Kentucky marble set on a base of native limestone. It was made by the Brown Monument Company, of this city. Inset in the marble, which is a deep cream color, is a handsome bronze tablet that was designed by Jules Berchen, of Chicago, an associate of Leonard Vold, sculptor, who made the famous mask of Abraham Lincoln. The inscription is printed with this article. Dr. Barton was the originator of the monument to Jesse Head and he made the first contribution to it. Funds have been contributed voluntarially from many sources by the admirers of Abraham Lincoln and descendants of the rugged old preacher, who was as Godly as he was fearless. It brings a belated tribute to the man whose life was spent in work among the earliest settlers here, and who, in the conscientious course of his ministerial duties, left the record with his own signature attached, that removed the stigma on the birth of the Great Emancipator, that hung like a shadow over him until the day of his death.

Dr. Barton is the author of several well known books of Lincoln history and it was while searching for material for these that he became interested in Jesse Head, and is now preparing a record of his life.

A number of interested people from out of town attended the unveiling.

REV. JESSE HEAD
JAN. 26, 1765 – MARCH 22, 1842.
PREACHER-EDITOR-PATRIOT
HE MARRIED JUNE 13, 1806 THOMAS LINCOLN
NANCY HANKS, PARENTS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.
JANE RAMSEY HEAD
APRIL 10, 1768 – AUGUST 30, 1851
MARRIED JESSE HEAD, JANUARY 9, 1789
AND NOBLY SHARED WITH HIM THE
PRIVATIONS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE LIFE
OF A PIONEER PREACHER.

The Inscription

REV. JESSE HEAD

JAN. 28, 1768—MARCH 22, 1842

PREACHER—EDITOR—PATRIOT

HE MARRIED JAN. 12, 1806, THOMAS LINCOLN AND

NANCY HANKS, PARENTS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

JANE RAMSEY HEAD

APRIL 10, 1768—AUG. 30, 1851

MARRIED JESSE HEAD JAN. 9, 1789, AND NOBLY SHARED

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THE LIFE OF A PIONEER PREACHER.

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